



# Helping the STORK

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

**T**HOUGH the baby-toting stork is a popular image, the realities of childbirth are somewhat more complicated. And for expectant mothers in Europe who are authorized to use U.S. government facilities overseas, having a baby requires even more forethought than mapping out the route to the hospital, knowing who to call when the contractions start and packing a suitcase for the hospital stay.

Those who want to deliver their babies at an American military hospital in Europe have only one option:

Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany.

Expectant mothers from Germany, Italy, Spain, Great Britain and Turkey have traveled to LRMCC for specialized medical care since Oct. 1, 1998, after other overseas U.S. medical facilities closed, said hospital spokeswoman Marie Shaw. All prospective mothers who experience complicated pregnancies must deliver their babies at the Landstuhl facility.

For prospective moms in the latter category, "stork" is closely associated with a program that is relatively new in Europe, the Stork Nest Program.

Besides employing some of the most highly qualified doctors and nurses in the military, LRMCC boasts a special neo-natal intensive-care unit for premature babies, said MAJ Ann Marie Blunt, Stork Nest Program coordinator.

Elvira Ortiz and her husband, SSG Inocencio Ortiz of the 21st Theater Area Support Command, in Kaiserslautern, Germany, can vouch for LRMCC's neo-natal care facilities. Their baby, Migdiel, who weighed in

**Neo-natal ICU care for premature babies is just one service LRMCC offers through the Stork Nest Program.**

at 3 pounds, 4 ounces at birth, remained in the facility for several weeks until his doctor was certain he was strong enough to go home. During that time he received round-the-clock care.

Through the Stork Nest program, at-risk mothers-to-be arrive in Landstuhl, typically in their 28th to 31st weeks of pregnancy, said MAJ Clunie Johnson, neo-natal ICU head nurse. Some women come into the program much earlier. When the prospective mothers arrive is determined by their physicians.

"Some babies are born as young as 23 weeks," said Johnson, as she monitored premature twins that both weighed about two pounds.

Some babies must be placed on ventilators because they can't breathe on their own. Others are placed in incubators until their vital organs have had a chance to develop a little more, they've gained weight and can better fend off potential illnesses, Johnson said.

Stork Nesters, as program participants are called, live in transient billets at LRMCC until they give birth. Being among other women who are experiencing initial loneliness — and, for those pregnant with their first children,

similar fear of the unknown — allows them to draw strength and comfort from one another at a time when they're far from home and away from family and loved ones, Blunt said.

Together, program participants can go on day trips and attend classes on parenting and breast-feeding, among other activities. Within a week of their arrival, Blunt coordinates their OB-GYN appointments and arranges a tour of LRMCC's obstetrics facilities.

Additionally, the American Red Cross provides Stork Nesters with access to computers, makes necessary arrangements for contacting loved ones in an emergency, and provides a "buddy" who will be available to run occasional errands or go along on shopping trips for groceries, baby clothes and toys.

Red Cross volunteers SPC Noraliz Maysonet-Candelarie, a dental assistant with the 464th Medical Company in Landstuhl, and SGT Amber Arroyo, a lab technician with LRMCC's Company C, are co-chairs of the Stork Nest

**Elvira Ortiz, wife of SSG Inocencio Ortiz, cradles the couple's newborn son. He was premature and weighed 3 pounds, 4 ounces at birth.**

Buddy Program. It's their job to assign or become a buddy to a Stork Nester.

Arroyo was Air Force Staff Sgt. LeAnn Stetson's buddy for a while. "This is my first pregnancy," said Stetson, who's stationed in Incirlik, Turkey. "And I don't know what to expect. It's nice to not have to sit alone in a room waiting for something to happen."

"The first day I met Amber, she took me to Kaiserslautern's 800-year-anniversary festival. Then we went shopping," said Stetson, who had been a Stork Nester for more than 30 days. "She's also invited me to her home."

While in Landstuhl, the Stork Nesters receive their mail, addressed to "Attention: Stork Nest Program," and they're eligible to use all military support services, including dining facility, post exchange, shoppette and USO.

The program does have its drawbacks, Blunt said. Besides family separation, costs can initially be a burden if program participants don't plan ahead. Stork Nesters are asked to pay for everything up front and are fully reimbursed for all "reasonable"

expenses. Rental cars are not included.

Billeting costs \$18.50 per night, with an additional \$8 fee for spouses. In-hospital costs are \$10.20 per day for civilians and dependents; \$10.20 for infants, and \$8 for active-duty personnel, Blunt said.

Typically, spouses and significant others from outside Germany arrive in Landstuhl about a week before the expected delivery date, to share the momentous occasion.

After the birth, program personnel coordinate with appropriate agencies to register the child's birth and complete requirements for the child to be included on the mother's passport. □



Red Cross volunteers SPC Noraliz Maysonet-Candelarie (left) and SGT Amber Arroyo (right) pose with mom-to-be Air Force Staff Sgt. LeAnn Stetson before leaving LRMCC on a shopping trip.

**Prospective moms in Europe who would like more information about having their babies at LRMCC — or those interested specifically in the Stork Nest Program for at-risk pregnancies — may contact MAJ Ann Marie Blunt by calling (DSN) 486-7914, commercial 06371-86-7914 (from within Germany) or commercial 0049-06371-86-7914 (from elsewhere within Europe).**



*Landstuhl Regional Medical Center's Stork Nest Program offers expectant mothers a broad range of specialized services.*